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Ecocritique, the Commons, Subjunctive

Sean Cubitt

Media+Environment "States of Media and Environment" strand

The key challenge for ecocriticism is ecocritique, and the key problem for ecocritique is the question of the commons. The problem, challenge and question are each involved in each other, as is only correct for an ecological approach.

Film studies has followed literary criticism into the thematic exploration of texts, and begun the work of expanding outward from obviously ecologically themed works towards the general applicability of ecocritique to any audiovisual text. Media studies also began with thematic criticism but now travels where literary studies rarely goes, into analysis of the infrastructure of materials, energy and product lifecycles. Like all media studies, we have to date concentrated almost exclusively on entertainment and news media, and scarcely touched on workplace media, especially databases that seeks to include everything but are in actuality contained by the ecology they exclude. There remains a fourth arena where media studies has developed a powerful analytic corpus but ecocriticism has yet to develop, the field of policy studies, in debates on intellectual property (which structures streaming media), internet governance and elsewhere. These fields of thematic, infrastructural, workplace and policy issues share the question of the commons, what it is or might be or become; of what implicates the human in the natural and the natural in the human, of the role of the technological in their mutual implication, of the commons as politics, as action and speech which, like action, can only take place in the present.

'Present', but in what sense? Historians – of media among others – help us understand what has brought us to this pass, and what obligations we bear to the victims of ecocide. They leave us with the task of understanding what we might mean when we speak of the present, now, the contemporary. This is one of the great challenges when we try to imagine the commons. It is the same unanswered challenge every philosophy must face, and none have so far completed: what is time? Put that way, the question is badly formed: time "is" not. It is a process. Like colour, it is both a property of the physical world-out-there and a physiological and psychological quality of experience. Not only does time operate differently at quantum and cosmic scales; it felt different first thing this morning to the way it feels right now. It seems likely that it means something different when people live close to the cycles of day and night and the turning seasons to what it means in the industrial factory, and different again in the

network era. Time has a history. But then again, time is undoubtedly an ontological property of the world wherever the third law of thermodynamic operates.

Ecocritique has yet to engage fully with the ontology/history issue. On the ontological side, we have the hypothesis of primal mediation: that in the beginning, or at a fundamental level, everything mediates everything else; that the universe is composed of quantum foam, symmetrical in every dimension, including time. Events pop improbably into existence. One of those events produced a longer-lasting constellation which we call communication.

Communication parted sender from receiver, referent from sign, message from channel, establishing all those fundamental binaries from which we have suffered ever since: subject/object, human/natural, male/female, social/individual, technological/organic, settler/indigenous . . . These partitions are illusory, in the sense that they deny the foundational, ontological mediation, but nonetheless have actual effects, which we cannot just wish away. The friction between mediation and communication, between the foam of perpetual process and ordered systems, is where history emerges, both the natural history of evolution and the human history of our alienation from the planet, our own bodies and each other.

Curiously, the ontological and communicative models of environmentalism share the quality of self-equilibration. The quantum foam is random but stable: that is the function of its symmetry. Optimally efficient communicative systems, such as the free market, are also fundamentally homeostatic. Both, in this sense, produce the present as a perfect description of eternity. In the case of economic communication, the accumulated past of nature exists only to the extent that it can be treated as raw material now, because now is the only time when it is possible to produce profit. The style of economics called financialisation that developed in response to the oil crisis of the 1970s adds a new temporal dimension. It rests four-square on debt, the money we expect to earn in future that we spend today. Since debt is now compulsory, required to fund excess consumption of excess production, all future earnings vanish into the present. The consumption of future resources is not analogous: it is the *same* process. The contemporary economy, which lives off the future, knows no future, since its only future is the moment when the last debt is paid, a moment that never comes. When there is no future other than present profit, past and future disappear into the singularity of the financial present. Thus both communication and mediation swallow all other times into their perpetual, homeostatic 'now'. Ecocritique cries a plague on both their houses.

Whenever environmentalism points us towards a politics that either returns to the lost innocence of the past or postpones the restitution of the environment into the future, it is complicit in this homeostatic foreclosure of the present as the moment which all other times disappear into. Ecocritique is not an environmentalism.

Ecocritique refuses the very idea of environment: nothing environs us, except what we eject from the bubble of humanity. Little by little we have environmentalised not only oceans and land and animals but large tracts of ourselves: from the waist down after Luther, from the neck down after Darwin, from the face back after Freud, our very bodies have become environments that we can exploit, dump waste into, and now steward and invest in. We are becoming our own environments before we have even become human. As the economy eats the future, so it dumps its waste into the future, as clearly as it does into landfill. Ecopolitics cannot wait for a future that, at present, as present, no longer exists.

The commons cannot be 'environmental' because it is not common if it does not include humans. Nor can it be reconstituted from the lost past or the ontological foundation of Being. The commons can only emerge in a time other than the one we are squandering. Its task is not to create a future, but to create a present which is no longer a universal digestive tract. It is the present that needs saving, not the future. To redeem the present, we need to get straight our obligations: not our debts to the future, but our obligations to the past.

But how can we do that? How can we speak for those who died, or whose lives and hopes were blighted in the European enclosures, colonial genocides, slavery and immiseration? How can we speak for rivers and forests, oceans and species decimated? We cannot speak on behalf of: that would be to deny the right to participate of all that is excluded now as well as what has been excluded by its murder. This quandary brings into question whether anything can speak on its own behalf since to speak is always to enter into the communicative, where the system speaks itself. This is why ecocritical *media* studies are important: there can be no politics in the 21st century that is not mediated, but media systems regulate access as well as the syntax of political argument because any system precludes the autonomy of its members.

Unless we find another mode of inhabiting and articulating the present that is not tied to functional (vocative, imperative, cognitive) modes of systemic communication. The excluded environs express themselves as the outside-inside of systems: as noise from beyond and poetic

(self-reflexive) functions within, the glitches inherent in any complete and coherent system. Nature and technologies, including the technologies of language and economics, generate incoherence and incompleteness, casting light on the shadow-system that insists its illuminates itself. To the extent that ecocritique seeks any kind of truth, it seeks it in the subjunctive mood of what could, should or might be the case. Hence the importance of studying workplace media, the dominant media of our times, the media of domination which operate in the present to stabilise the present, typically by reducing time to a horizontal axis, in order to reduce truth to coordinates in a field devoted to the assertion of the eternal Now. Against such perfect communication, the subjunctive mode of ecocritique introduces the otherwise of primal mediation, not as goal or even immanence (grise) but as the eternal incompleteness of the present. Ecocritique demands redemption of the present as more-than-human commons, now.